

SACRED INSCRIPTION AS COSMOLOGY:
GLIMPSES OF *ʿILM AL-ḤURŪF*



SAYYAD NIZAMUDDIN AHMAD

ORIGINALLY PRESENTED AT:

INSCRIPTION AS ART IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY
LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

DHŪ AL-ḤIJJA 9, 1416
APRIL 27, 1996

ONE DAY PRIOR TO THE BLESSED *ʿID AL-ADḤĀ*

ABSTRACT:

The Qurʾān (41):53 speaks of the macrocosm and microcosm as consisting of signs (*āyāt*) just as its own individual “verses” are also known as *āyāt*. Thus the world may be thought as a vast tapestry of signs that make up the “Qurʾān of Engendered Existence (*al-qurʾān al-takwīnī*).” Indeed such a view is to be found in Islamic esoterism along with various contemplative methods based on Qurʾānic chanting (*tajwīd*) and an esoteric understanding of the Arabic alphabet that may be termed “letter mysticism.” We examine aspects of such letter mysticism in the *Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), the contemplative methods of a branch of the Shādhdhulī Ṣūfī Ṭarīqa and the “theory” of the prophets of inner being of ʿAlā al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336) upon which some of these contemplative practices are based.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

ن وَالْقَلَمِ وَمَا يَسْطُرُونَ ﴿١﴾

Nūn. By the pen and that which they write . . .

Qurʾān, Sūrat al-Qalam(68):1.

. . . the worshipful slave does not complete [the actualization in him] of the secrets of faith until he comes to know the realities of these letters in their stations . . .

-Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī,
al-Futūḥāt al-makkiya
v.1, para. 472, ln. 10-11

In the above quoted Qurʾānic “verse” is an allusion to the primordial act of sacred inscription in which the Celestial Pen of Divine Power (*qalam al-quḍra*)¹ as crystallization of the Divine command of engendering existence (*amr al-takwīn*)² inscribed the modalities of all existence in the ink of ontological mercy (*al-rahmat al-*

¹ See ʿAllāma Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabāʾī *al-Mizān fi tafsīr al-qurʾān* 21 Vols. Qum: Maṣṣhūrāt Jamāʿat al-Mudarrisīn fi al-Ḥawza al-ʿIlmiyya, n.d. v. 19, 376-379 for traditions that support this view. See also Jalāl al-Dīn Suyūṭī *al-Hayʾah al-saniya fi al-hayʾah al-sunniya*. Cairo: Maktabah Ibn Sīnā, n.d. 25-29.

² *Kun fa yakūn*, Qurʾān 2:117, 3:47, 3:59, 6:72, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, 40:98.

rahmaniya/al-wujūdiyya/al-dhatiya)³ upon the guarded tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), which is none other than the Glorious Qurʾān (*al-Qurʾān al-majīd*)⁴. Just as the primordial act of Divine inscription was the Qurʾān so too its first manifestation in humanity was as Qurʾānic calligraphy. With the march of the centuries a multitude of styles emerged ranging from the sober *kūfic* to the very delicate *nastaʿliq* which were in turn used to write texts other than the Qurʾān and were also employed in architecture and the crafts. Yet all these manifold styles and applications of Islamic calligraphy are but a reflection of the primordial Divine inscription and thus represent the visual embodiment of the Qurʾānic realities (*ḥaqāʾiq*). It is the *visual dimension* that has received ample attention in scholarly works on calligraphy. In this essay, however, we would like to take a few glimpses at another approach.

Whether one considers a Mamlūk period illuminated Qurʾān, the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock, an ornate Safavid period *Divān-e-Ḥāfez*, or even a mass produced plastic *āyat al-kursī* hanging on the rear-view mirror of a New York taxi — all of these examples of sacred *inscription* are deprived of an important dimension of their significance if they are considered *merely as inscription*. For all of these examples — to state the obvious — are comprised of words (*kalimāt*)

³ *wa rahmatī wasaʿat kulla shayʾin* (... "and my mercy embraceth all things..." Qurʾān 7:156. "Existence itself is a mercy for every existent thing." (*fa inna al-wujūda rahmatun fi ḥaqqi kulli mawjūd*). Ibn al-ʿArabī *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiya* 4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d. v.2, p. 28, line 27. Also see W. C. Chittick *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989. 23, 130, 290-291 for a discussion of "ontological mercy" - a phrase we have borrowed from a chapter title of T. Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism*. Los Angeles, University of California Press. 1983.

⁴ See Qurʾān 85:2.

and words are, first and foremost, uttered (*malḥūza*). To suggest another metaphor if Islamic calligraphy is the *visual reflection* of Qurʾānic realities, then the *utterance* of the words inscribed is but the *echo* or *reverberation* of the primordial word: Be! (*kun*) which is the origin of all sound. It is this sonoral dimension — in both its *oral* and *aural* aspects that we would like to examine.

Recitation, reading aloud, or rhythmic chanting of holy scriptures is found in virtually every religion in one form or another. Examples that come to mind include the recitation of the Qurʾān, Torah, the Vedas, (*Mahāyāna*) Buddhist sūtras such as the Heart Sutra, Gregorian Chants (Catholic), the Hesychyst Prayer (Orthodox) and, perhaps, Protestant hymns. The first four are from religious traditions that all have very profound mystical teachings about their respective sacred languages i.e. Arabic, Hebrew, and Sanskrit⁵. Each of these bodies of teachings could be called “letter mysticism” or a kind of ‘ilm al-ḥurūf in as much as each of their respective mystical doctrines revolves around an esoterism of their alphabets both as *written* or “*inscripted*” signs and as “*voiced*” or *uttered sounds* where the latter are always given primary significance.⁶

⁵ I am not aware of such traditions regarding the various liturgical languages of Christianity (Latin, Greek, Syriac, Coptic, etc.)

⁶ For an exposition of the cabalistic teachings of Judaism, see *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation*. Translation, commentary and edition of original Hebrew text by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. Weiser: York Beach, Maine, 1991. Chaps. 2.2-2.3. For Hinduism see “Vedic Mantras,” Frits Staal in *Understanding Mantras*, Harvey P. Alper (ed.), (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 48-95 and the massive bibliographical survey of mantras in the same volume 327-530; *Hymns From the Vedic Age: Selected Hymns from the Rig Veda with Yogic Interpretation*, David Frawley, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1986), xi-xii and 1-30; *Sonic Theology: Hinduism and Sacred Sound*. G. Beck. University of S. Carolina Press, 1993 especially chaps 1-2. Madhu Khanna’s beautiful book *Yantra: Tantric Symbol of*

We will examine some of the esoteric teachings of ʿilm al-ḥurūf as expounded by Islam's premier esoterist the 6th-7th/12th-13th Century ṣūfī Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (560-638/1165-1240) in his encyclopedic work

al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīya (the Meccan Illuminations)⁷. The entire second chapter of which is devoted to explaining the nature of the Arabic letters. Therein the Shaykh al-Akbar (Supreme Master) — as he is known — expounds a cosmology in which they are accorded a central place not only as cosmological symbols but as the cosmological principles which underlie the very fabric of the created order. Following this we will consider the actual practices of a branch of the Shādhdhulī ṣūfī ṭarīqa and their relation to the esoteric meaning of the Qurʾān as explained by ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla al-Simnānī (659-736/1261-1336).

Essential to the understanding of the Shaykh al-Akbar's cosmology is the understanding of the Qurʾān, indeed it is the door that opens onto this realm. Recitation (*tilāwa*) of the Qurʾān — in the five prayers and otherwise — in addition to recitation of other sacred texts (*adʿiyya* or *aḥzāb*), which often consist entirely of Qurʾānic verses

Unity. London, Thames&Hudson, 1979, devotes chap. 2 to "Archetypal Space and Sacred Sound." Also see p.39-43 of same. As for Buddhist teachings, I have found E. Conze's *Buddhist Wisdom Books Containing the Diamond Sutra and Heart Sutra*. London: Allen&Unwin, 1958, 101-107 to be quite useful. Also Lāma Anagarika Govinda's *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* is a profound study devoted entirely to commenting upon the mantra OM MANI PADME HŪM. *Sacred Calligraphy of the East*. J. Stevens. Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1981, Chap.1 especially 25-30 are most illuminating. In addition *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice*. M. Kiyota. Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1978, Chap. 3.4-3.5 has a very profound discussion of meditation on the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, "a", as it relates to the *adi buddha* or Primordial Buddha.

⁷ For an account of his life see *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn al-ʿArabī*. Claude Addas. Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993.

or are built around certain verses, forms the core of Muslim spiritual life⁸. When recited according to the principles of *'ilm al-tajwīd* Qur'ānic recitation can become a contemplative method having in view the realization of certain latencies in man. Such methods are employed by the various *ṣūfī* paths (*ṭuruq*) and are intimately rooted in the cosmology recorded by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the *Futūḥāt*. Fundamental to this Qur'ānic dimension is what one might call the "homology" of existence and the Qur'ān, which through a profound understanding of the "world of the Book" sees the "world as book." The Qur'ān consists of 114 *sūrahs* which are often incorrectly interpreted as "chapters."⁹ *Sūrah* literally means a high place or station. Thus each *sūrah* represents a different station in the world of the Book. In turn each *sūrah* consists of *āyāt* (sg. *āyah*) with over 6000 in the whole Qur'ān. This term is often misunderstood to mean "verse." In fact *āyah* actually means sign or portent. Thus, every *āyah* of the Qur'ān is a sign of Allah. Similarly the book of creation also consists of *sūrahs* and *āyats*. The Qur'ān itself in numerous signs (*āyāt*) points to these signs (*āyāt*) in the book of the world. By way of example:

⁸ We have in mind *aḥzāb* ie. orisons such as the *Ḥizb al-Barr* (Orison of the Earth) and *Ḥizb al-Baḥr* (Orison of the Sea) which are employed by, but not restricted to the *Shādhidhulī ṣūfī ṭarīqa*; or the *adʿiyya* ie. supplications such as the *Duʿā Kumayl* [ibn Ziyad] or the *Duʿā al-Jawshan al-Kabīr* both favored by the practitioners of "shīʿī" gnosis (*'irfān*)

⁹ On this and related terms see the standard lexicons of Arabic: *Tāj al-ʿarūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs* and *Lisān al-ʿarab*. Also worthy of recommendation is the exhaustive lexicographic study, in 14 volumes, of Qur'ānic language: *al-Taḥqīq fi kalimāt al-qurʾān al-karīm*. Ḥasan al-Mustaḥawī. Tehran: Jumhūriyat Irān al-Islāmīyya, Wazārat al-Thaqāfa wa'l-Irshād al-Islāmī, 1368 hijri (solar).

Lo! in the difference of the night and day and all that Allah hath created in the heavens and the earth are signs, verily for those who guard (themselves).

-Qur'ān, Sūrat Yūnus (10):6

We shall show them our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it will be made manifest unto them that He is the Truth.

-Qur'ān, Sūrat Fuṣṣilat (41):53

Hence man as microcosm reflects those very signs of the macrocosm that point to the Divine Reality. In this sense he is his own book. This all-comprehensive nature of man is discussed by Ibn al-ʿArabī in the first chapter of his *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*¹⁰. Here he points out that the reason for this is that man is the embodiment of all the Most Beautiful Names (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnāʾ*). These Divine Names are latent in every man and woman but only very few come to actualize them. The station of one who does is known in ṣūfī terminology as *al-insān al-kāmil* (Perfect or Universal Man)¹¹. In the hierarchy of engendered existence (*al-marātīb al-kawniyya*) Perfect Man stands at the apex of the pyramid because he is the "all-inclusive object" (*al-kawn al-jāmiʿ*) that reflects the essences of the Most Beautiful Names. As such, Perfect Man is the locus of the self manifestation of the Real (*majlā al-ḥaqq*).

It was the year 592/1202 in Mecca — the mother of cities (*Umm al-Qurā*) — that Ibn al-ʿArabī definitely entered into this station (*maqām*) while performing the ritual circuit (*ṭawāf*) of the Kaʿba. Here in a vision of the imaginal world (*ʿālam al-mithāl*) he has an encounter

¹⁰ See ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī *Sharḥ Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* Cairo: 1321?/1903?, 8.

¹¹ ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (767H-805H) devoted an entire work to this idea entitled *al-Insān al-kāmil* 2 vols. Cairo: Ḥalabī, 1402/1981. Another work of the same title exists in Persian by ʿAzīz al-Dīn Nasafī.

with the inner reality of his own self.¹² He describes this encounter in the first chapter of the *Futūḥāt* in these words:

Know, my noble friend and intimate companion, that after I arrived in the Mecca of Benedictions, the Treasury of Spiritual tranquillities, and movements, and after I experienced there what I experienced, there came a time when I happened to be performing the ritual circuits around the Ancient Temple. As I was carrying out the circumambulations and reciting the formulas of glorification, praise, magnification and Oneness — now kissing the Black Rock, now touching the Yemenite corner, now drawing near to the Wall of Multazam — as I was standing in a state of ecstasy in front of the Black Rock I encountered the Evanescent Youth, the Silent Speaker, He who is neither alive nor dead, the Simple Composite, He who envelops and is enveloped. When I saw him perform the ritual circuits around the Temple, like a living person revolving round a person who has died, I recognised his true reality and his metaphorical form, and I understood that the circuit round the Temple is like the prayer over a corpse . . . Then God revealed to me the dignity of this Youth and his transcendence with regard to “where” and “when”. When I recognized his dignity and his descent (*inzāl*), when I saw his rank in existence and his state, I embraced his right side, wiped away the sweat of revelation on his forehead and declared to him: “Look upon him who aspires to your company and desires your intimacy!” He replied to me using signs and enigmas he had created so that he would never have to speak except in symbols: “When you recognise, understand and realise my symbolic language, you know that it can never be grasped either by the most eloquent orators or by the most competent of rhetoricians . . .” He gestures to me and I understood. The reality of his Beauty unveiled itself to me and I was overcome with love. I became powerless and was instantly overwhelmed. When I recovered from my swoon, my sides shot through with fear, he knew I had realised who he was . . . He said to me: “Observe the details of my constitution and the disposition of my form! You will find what you ask of me written upon me because I neither speak

¹² On the nature of this encounter, the concept of the imaginal world and the concept of *taʾwīl*, to be discussed below, see the magisterial works of Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ʿArabī* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series, 1969), 277-83; *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques* 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971-2), 1:135-218, 2:214-232 and *Histoire de la philosophie islamique, avec la collaboration de Seyyed Hossein Nasr et Osman Yahya*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 13-30. A portion of the text from *En Islam iranien* is available in English in Seyyed Hossein Nasr (ed.) *Shīʿism: Doctrines, Thought and Spirituality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 189-202.

nor converse. I have no knowledge apart from the knowledge of Myself; My Essence does not differ from my names. I am Knowledge, the Known and the Knower; I am Wisdom, the Sapiential Deed and the Sage!"¹³

The first of the Divine secrets that was made known to him was the science of the letters and it is to this science that he devotes the second chapter of his *Futūḥāt*. He begins section one (*al-faṣl al-awwal*) by giving a detailed account of the "ranks" (*marātib*) or "gradations" of each letter in terms of which celestial spheres (*aflāk*) they belong to, ranging from a rank of seven up to ten celestial spheres. He also lists the nature (*ṭabīʿa*) of each letter in terms of hot, moist, dry, cold or combinations thereof. It is in the continuation of this section (*tābiʿa*) that he begins to discuss the cosmological principles with which we are concerned. Below we translate portions of his text providing comments where necessary. The continuation begins:

Know — may Allah grant us and you success — that the letters (*hurūf*) are a community (*umma*) from among the communities (*umam*). They are addressed (*mukhāṭabūn*) [with Divine address=*khiṭāb*] and obligated (*mukallafūn*) [by the Divine obligation=*taklif*]. Among them are messengers from their genus (*jinn*s) and they have names with respect to their nature (*min ḥaythu hum*). No one knows this except the people of unveiling (*ahl al-kashf*) from our way (*ṭariq*). The world of the letters is the most clear of worlds in speech and the most evident of worlds in exposition. These [worlds] are of different types just as the traditionally understood worlds [that is to say the world of jinn or men, or animals, or plants, etc. are of different types].¹⁴

Note that Ibn al-ʿArabī stresses that this knowledge is only attained by *kashf* and is not to be found in books. After having

¹³ Addas. *Quest for the Red Sulphur*, 201-2. The original text is Osman Yahia's critical edition of the *Futūḥāt* Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 1405/1985, 216-219. Further references to this edition will be given as follows OY 1, 100, 10 = Osman Yahia edition vol. 1, p. 100, para. 10.

¹⁴ OY 1, 260, 442.

enumerated each of these worlds of letters in paragraphs 443-450, he then presents another ranking of the letters.

These then are the worlds [of the letters]. To every world is a messenger from their genus [i.e.. from the genus specific to their world]. They have subtleties and opacities (*latāʿif wa kathūʿif*). Their obligation from the [Divine] address is [solely] injunction (*amr*); they have no prohibition (*nahy*). Among them are a generality (*ʿāmma*), and elite (*khāṣṣa*), the elite of the elite (*khāṣṣat al-khāṣṣa*), and the quintessence of the epitomy of the elite of the elite (*ṣafāʾu khluṣati khāṣṣatʿl-khāṣṣa*).¹⁵

The generality are JĪM, ḌĀD, KHĀʾ, DĀL, GHAYN, and SHĪN.¹⁶

The elite of the elite are ALIF, YĀʾ, BĀʾ, SĪN, KĀF, TĀʾ, QĀFʾ, ṬĀʾ, WAW, ṢĀD, HĀʾ, NŪN, LĀM, AND ʿAYN.¹⁷

The epitomy of the elite of the elite is the BĀʾ.¹⁸

The elite which are a degree above the generality are none other than the letters at the beginnings of [certain] *sūrah*s [*hurūf awāʾil al-suwar*], such as “ALIF LĀM MĪM” and “ALIF LĀM MĪM ṢĀD.” There are fourteen [such] letters: ALIF, LĀM, MĪM, ṢĀD, RĀʾ, KĀF, HĀʾ, YĀʾ, ʿAYN, ṬĀʾ, SĪN, ḤĀʾ, QĀF, and, NŪN.¹⁹

The quintessence of the epitomy of the elite of the elite are NŪN, MĪM, RĀʾ, BĀʾ, DĀL, ZAY, ALIF, TĀʾ, WAW, HAʾ, ṢĀʾ, THĀʾ, LĀM, FĀʾ, and SĪN.²⁰

... I contemplated these worlds [lit. looked into them=*nazaratu fi hāʾulāʾil-ʿālam*] to see which one of them could be elaborated upon more than others and I found it [i.e.. a particular world] to be a world favored with distinction. And it is none other than the world of letters preceding the unknown *sūrah*s (*ʿālam awāʾil al-suwar al-majhūla*) like ALIF LĀM MĪM of the al-Baqara, ALIF LĀM MĪM ṢĀD, and ALIF LĀM RĀʾ of Yūnus and its sisters.²¹

¹⁵ OY 1, 261, 451.

¹⁶ OY 1, 262, 452.

¹⁷ OY 1, 262, 453.

¹⁸ OY 1, 262, 454.

¹⁹ OY 1, 262, 455.

²⁰ OY 1, 262, 456.

²¹ OY 1, 264, 465. The “sisters” in question are *sūrah*s Hūd (11), Yūsuf (12), Ibrāhīm (14) and al-Ḥijr (15).

Hence these *awāʿil al-suwar* which are also known as *fawātiḥ al-suwar* (openers of the *sūrahs*) or as *al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭʿāt* (dis-jointed letters) are of central importance. Note that in all they number 14 distinct letters; however, if one includes repetitions they come to 78 occurring at the beginning of 29 different *sūrahs*. In some *sūrahs* such as al-Qalam (68) there is only one such letter, in others they occur in pairs like YĀʾ SĪN or ṬĀʾ HĀʾ, while in yet other they range from groups of three, four or five letters. These fourteen letters constitute exactly half of the Arabic alphabet and are known as the luminous letters (*al-ḥurūf al-nūrānīya*). The remaining 14 letters of the alphabet are known as the dark letters (*al-ḥurūf al-ẓulmānīya*).

In Table 1 on the facing page is a graphic representation²² of the 28 luminous and dark letters arranged in a circular form. Note here the place of the '29th' letter – the *hamzah*.

The luminous letters, the dark letters and the *sūrahs* in which the former occur and whether singly or in pairs etc., are given in Tables 2-3.

^{22c}Abd Allah Nur ad-Din Durkee. *The School of the Shādhūdhulīyyah: Volume One, Orisons* (Privately printed, Alexandria, Egypt, 1411/1991), (Page 84 Figure 12). *The Twenty Eight Mansions of the Moon and the Universal Shim*.

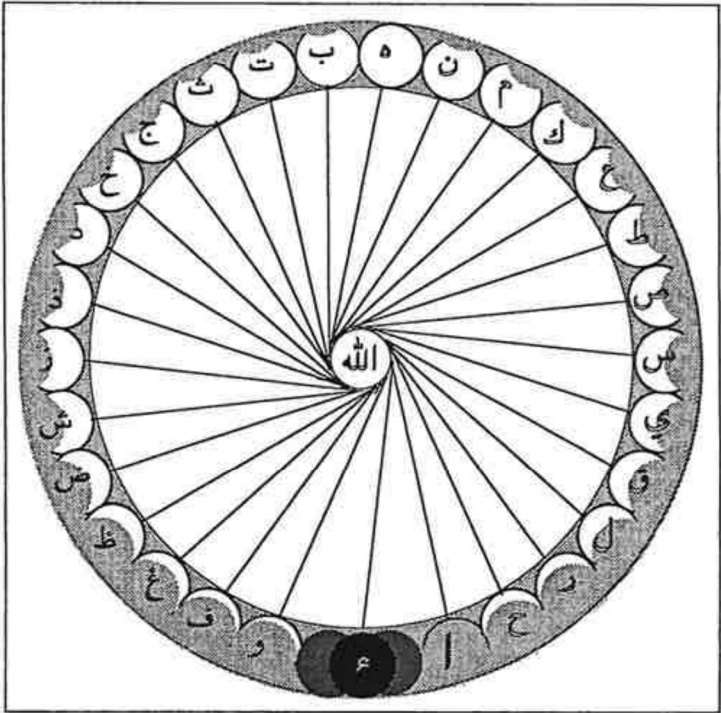


TABLE 1:
GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE LUMINOUS AND DARK LETTERS IN ARABIC

TABLE 2: DIVISION OF ARABIC LETTERS INTO LUMINOUS AND DARK CATEGORIES

<i>Entry</i> <i>No.</i>	Luminous Letters	Dark Letters
1	ALIF	BĀʾ
2	LĀM	TĀʾ
3	MĪM	THĀʾ
4	ṢĀD	JĪM
5	RĀʾ	KHĀʾ
6	KĀF	DĀL
7	HĀʾ	DHĀL
8	YĀʾ	ZAY
9	ʿAYN	SHĪN
10	TĀʾ	ḌĀD
11	SĪN	ZĀʾ
12	ḤĀʾ	GHAYN
13	QĀF	FĀʾ
14	NŪN	WAW

$$14+14=28+1=29$$

TABLE 3: LUMINOUS LETTERS AND THEIR SŪRAHS

Entry No.	Luminous Letters	Letter Count	Sūrah	Sūrah No.
1	ALIF LĀM MĪM	3	al-Baqara	2
2	ALIF LĀM MĪM	3	Āl ʿImrān	3
3	ALIF LĀM MĪM ṢĀD	4	al-Aʿrāf	7
4	ALIF LĀM RĀʾ	3	Yūnus	10
5	ALIF LĀM RĀʾ	3	Hūd	11
6	ALIF LĀM RĀʾ	3	Yūsuf	12
7	ALIF LĀM MĪM RĀʾ	4	al-Raʿd	13
8	ALIF LĀM RĀʾ	3	Ibrāhīm	14
9	ALIF LĀM RĀʾ	3	al-Ḥijr	15
10	KĀF HĀʾ YĀʾ ʿAYN ṢĀD	5	Maryam	19
11	ṬĀʾ HĀʾ	2	ṬĀʾ HĀʾ	20
12	ṬĀʾ SĪN MĪM	3	al-Shuʿarāʾ	26
13	ṬĀʾ SĪN	2	al-Naml	27
14	ALIF LĀM MĪM	3	al-Qaṣaṣ	28
15	ALIF LĀM MĪM	3	al-ʿAnkabūt	29
16	ALIF LĀM MĪM	3	al-Rūm	30
17	ALIF LĀM MĪM	3	Luqmān	31
18	ALIF LĀM MĪM	3	al-Sajdah	32
19	YĀʾ SĪN	2	YĀʾ SĪN	36
20	ṢĀD	1	ṢĀD	37
21	ḤĀʾ MĪM	2	Ghāfir	40
22	ḤĀʾ MĪM	2	Fuṣṣilat	41
23	ḤĀʾ MĪM ʿAYN SĪN QĀF	5	al-Shūra	42
24	ḤĀʾ MĪM	2	al-Zukhruf	43
25	ḤĀʾ MĪM	2	al-Dukhān	44
26	ḤĀʾ MĪM	2	al-Jāthiya	45
27	ḤĀʾ MĪM	2	al-Aḥqāf	46
28	QĀF	1	QĀF	50
29	NŪN	1	al-Qalam	68

Knowledge of these letters is necessary for the perfection of the faith, but this knowledge is only attained by the select few who realize in themselves the Divine Names.

Know that no one knows the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the principles (*mabādīʿ*) of the unknown *sūrah*s (*al-suwar al-majhūla*), except the people of the forms that can be intellected (*ahl al-suwar al-maʿqūla*) [they are the ones who have something of the favor of Allah's creation of Adam according to His form]. Furthermore [Allah] rendered the *sūrah*s (*suwar*) of the Qurʾān with the letter SĪN which denotes adherence to the Divine Law (*Sharīʿa*) in all things the outer (*zāhir*) of which is "the wall within which is torment" (*al-sūruʾlladhi fihīʾl-ʿadhāb*) in which one falls into ignorance of them [i.e., these letters] and whose inner (*bāʾin*) is denoted by ŠĀD which is the "station of mercy" (*maqām al-raḥma*): which is none other than knowledge of their realities (*ḥaqāʾiquhā*) and that is *tawḥīd* [i.e., knowledge of Divine Unity].²³

Thus He — may He be exalted and sanctified — made them [i.e. these *sūrah*s] to be 29 *sūrah*s and this is the perfection and completion of the form (*ṣūrah*) "And for the moon We have appointed mansions . . ." The twenty-ninth is the axis by which the celestial sphere (*ʿalak*) is supported. It is the cause of its existence, and it is [i.e. the *sūrah* designated 29th above and singled out as support of the celestial sphere] Sūrat Āl ʿImrān [the third *sūrah* in

²³ OY 1, 266, 470. The "wall within which is torment" is a reference to Qurʾān 57:13 (the *sūrah* of Iron = al-Ḥadīd): "On the day when the hypocritical men and the hypocritical women will say to those who believe: Look on us that we may borrow from your light! It will be said: Go back and seek for light! Then there will separate them a wall wherein is a gate, the inner side whereof containeth mercy, while the outer side thereof is toward the doom." (Pickthall translation.) The meaning of the letter SĪN in "wall" (*sūr* which when written in Arabic script is indistinguishable from the word *suwar* the plural of *sūrah*) is that inasmuch as the *sūrah*s of the Qurʾān delineate the parameters (*ḥudūd*) the Divine law (*sharīʿa*) their outward (*zāhir*) is nevertheless a torment (*ʿadhāb*) since they constitute a wall (*sūr*) between the worshipful slave (*ʿabd*) and the Lord (*rabb*). However, their interior (*bāʾin*) is the "station of mercy" since it is the *ṣūr* (spelled with ŠĀD) or trumpet which will be blown on Judgement Day signalling the resurrection. Or the interior is the "station of mercy" because it constitutes the *ṣūrah* (spelled with ŠĀD) or the form in which is manifested—to the people of the forms that can be intellected—of the ultimate Divine Will in the perfection of man through following the *sharīʿa*. See O. Yahia's note at the bottom of the cited page.

Qurʾānic sequence] “ALIF. LĀM. MĪM. ALLĀHU . . .” If it were not the other 28 would not have abided.²⁴

In all they [ie. these letters] including repetitions are 78 letters. The eight [of the 78] is the reality of the amount between 3 and 9 (*bidʿ*). He — upon whom be peace [ie. the Prophet Muḥammad — said: “*Īmān* (faith) consists of 70 odd [branches] . . .” and these letters are 78 letters in number. Thus the worshipful slave (*ʿabd*) does not complete [the actualization in him] of the secrets of *īmān* [faith] until he comes to know the realities of these letters in their *sūrahs* (stations).²⁵

How then does one come to know the realities of these letters and to actualize these secrets of faith in oneself — in short what is the path that leads to the station of *al-insān al-kāmil*? The Qurʾān states “Surely We created man of the best stature. Then We reduced him to the lowest of the low.”²⁶ Here we find an allusion to man’s dual nature, though created in the “image” of God (it is stated in a famous ḥadīth *khalāqallahu ādama ʿalā šūrathi*: Allah created Ādam on His “form”) because of his forgetfulness of God he is reduced to the lowest of the low. It is the nature of man (*insān*) to forget. The word *insān* by virtue of the presence of NŪN and SĪN may be esoterically (not necessarily morphologically) derived from the root *nasiya-yansā* meaning “to forget”. In fact there is a saying which plays upon this similarity in sound: *awwal al-nāsi nāsīn* ie. “The first man was one who forgets.” Yet if he wholeheartedly devotes himself to his Lord he can go from

²⁴ OY 1, 267, 471. The Qurʾānic reference is to YĀʾ SĪN (36):39.

²⁵ OY 1, 267, 472. Reference is made to the ḥadīth: “Faith has seventy-odd branches, the highest and best of which is to declare LĀ ILĀHA ILLĀ ALLĀHU, and the lowest of which is to remove something harmful from the path.” *Musnad Aḥmad* 2, no.379, 414, 445; *Ibn Mājah*, *Muqaddima*, 9; *Nasāʾi*, *Īmān*, 57; *Tirmidhi*, *Īmān*, 16; *Abū Dāwūd*, *Sunnah*, 14; *Muslim*, *Īmān*, 57; *Bukhārī*, *Īmān*, 3.

²⁶ Qurʾān 95:45.

the realm of being a member of the (average) people (*ins*) to the realm of intimacy (*uns*). [Note that the difference between *ins* and *uns* is simply of a vowel (*ḥaraka*)] This is achieved by complete adherence to the *sharīʿa* in all matters and through supererogatory acts of worship (*nawāfil*) that include daily recitation of the Qurʾān, fasting certain days besides the month of Ramaḍān, additional prayers above-and-beyond the five daily prayers such as *tahajjud* (a prayer performed in the deep watches of the night), and what is called *dhikr*. *Dhikr* means remembrance and refers to the mentioning of the Divine Name of Allah or one of the 99 Names, or certain other formulas. The repetition of these Names can range from the tens to the millions depending on the practice. All ṣūfis have a “*wird*” or daily practice involving *dhikr*, and Ibn al-ʿArabī was no exception to this rule. Such *awrād* (pl. of *wird*) typically involve some formula of seeking forgiveness, followed by a formula of prayer upon the Prophet Muḥammad, *ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa ʿālihi wa sallam*, and finally a Divine Name or the declaration LĀ ILĀHA ILLĀ ALLĀHU each of which is repeated 100 times. This is done before sunrise usually after Fajr (the Dawn prayer) and after sunset usually after Maghrib (the sunset prayer). Both *dhikr* and Qurʾānic recitation are oral/aural practices and require that special care be given to the correct pronunciation of the letters.

Adherence to the rules of Qurʾānic chanting (*tajwīd*) activates the letters causing sacred sounds to reverberate within and without. The various combinations of *ḥarakāt* (vowels) and *ḥurūf* (consonants) activate and channel the numerous Divine names throughout the being of the reciter. The basic long vowel sounds of Arabic Ā, Ī Ū

represented by ALIF, YĀʾ, and WAW are of special significance and have different effects. Ā “travels downward and stimulates the heart, the repository of Divine Attributes.”²⁷ Ī “travels upward and stimulates the pineal gland, which is not fully understood by Western science, but is felt to be responsible for activation of the life force.”²⁸ The sound of Ū “resonates on the outer rim of the pursed lips, and intermingles with the *idhn* of Allah, as His permission for our lives unites with our inhaled and exhaled breaths.”²⁹

In chapter 198 of the *Futūḥāt* entitled “Knowledge and Breath,” section 27, Ibn al-ʿArabī tells us that each letter has an angel which is its spirit (*rūḥ*) while the letter is like a body (*jasad*) for that angel. It is by virtue of these angelic spirits that the letters are activated regardless of what calligraphic style they may be written in.³⁰ Thus whenever the reciter says, for instance KĀF HĀʾ YĀʾ ʿAYN ṢĀD, then the angels of these letters respond and their aid may be enlisted if needed and if certain other conditions are met.³¹

Thus, the recitation practices — especially of the Qurʾān — in Islam are not merely mechanical, ritualistic mutterings but are potentially very powerful. The ultimate aim of all of these practices is *ʿirfān* (gnosis) whose perfected state is the realization of all the Most

²⁷ Hakim Moinuddin Chishti *The Book of Sufi Healing* New York: Inner Traditions, 1985, 126.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Ibn al-ʿArabī *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiya*. 4 vols. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d., v.2, 448, lines 11-14.

³¹ *Ibid.* lines 24-26.

Beautiful Names, or as stated previously, the perfection of the branches of *imān*. Regardless of the terms used for the end result the process itself is one of *taʾwīl* (tracing back to the Source). This term is also used for the esoteric commentary or interpretation of the Qurʾān — and this is by no means a coincidence. For there are — as we said at the outset — two “Qurʾāns:” *al-qurʾān al-tadwīnī* (the Recorded Qurʾān contained, as it were, between the two covers of the Book [*bayn al-daffatayn*]) and *al-qurʾān al-takwīnī* (the Qurʾān of Engendered Existence). This Qurʾān of Engendered Existence may also be conceived of in two ways. Man has within him a world, a Qurʾān which we can call *al-Qurʾān al-anfusī*: the Qurʾān of the Inner Self, which is distinct from what is known as *al-Qurʾān al-āfāqī*: the Qurʾān of the Outer Horizons.³² Man must know himself. He must perform a *taʾwīl* of his own *wujūd* (his own being), for “He who knoweth himself knoweth his Lord.”³³ This mystical exegesis is the spiritual exodus of the exegetic. Just as the Qurʾān speaks on the level of historical time (*al-zamān al-kathīf*) of certain persons and events like Pharaoh and Mūsa, *ʿalayhiʾl-salām*, there are, on the level of subtle transhistorical time (*al-zamān al-laṭīf*), tyrants and those who destroy them, furthermore on the level of hyper-subtle time (*al-zamān al-ālṭaf*), there is within everyone a pharaoh who must be defeated by the Mūsa of one’s inner being. This “internalization” of the Qurʾān

³² Recall Qurʾān 41:53 “We shall show them our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it will be manifest unto them that He is the Truth.”

³³ A famous ḥadīth: “*man ʿarafa nafsahu fa qad ʿarafa rabbahu.*”

constitutes the onto-genesis of *taʿwīl*.³⁴ The *muqaṭṭaʿāt* are indispensable in this onto-genesis inasmuch as they contain the entire *sūrahs* they precede just as the seed contains a whole tree.³⁵ Their proper recitation helps to realize these Qurʾānic realities within.

Among the methods of such internalization there is one practiced by the Shādhdhulīya ṣūfī *ṭarīqa* (although other ṣūfī *ṭuruq*, such as the Chishtīyya Ṣābirīyya Imdādīyya, also use it) which involves the recitation of *Ḥizb al-Baḥr* (Orison of the Sea), which consists of various Qurʾānic verses Divine Names and invocations. It was bestowed on Shaykh Abūl-Ḥasan al-Shādhdhulī (d. 656/1258), *quddisa sirruhu*, by the Prophet himself, *ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa ālihi wa sallam*, in a vision and contains many *muqaṭṭaʿāt*. The *Ḥizb al-Baḥr* is often recited after the *wird* before dawn and after dusk. It is preceded by some Qurʾānic formulae followed by a recitation — in order — of the letters of the Arabic alphabet. This is comparable to the practice of *bīja* (seed) *mantra* in Hinduism.³⁶ The *Ḥizb al-Baḥr* envisions the

³⁴ See H. Corbin *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. New York: Omega, 1994, 121-131. We will have more to say about the prophets of inner being below.

³⁵ Sīdī Aḥmad Zarrūq (d.899/1483). *Sharḥ Ḥizb al-Baḥr*. MS Princeton University Library. Mach Collection 3172. fol. 18a. Also see Mawlānā Sayyid Ḥusayn Aḥmad Madanī. *Irshadat*. edited by Mawlānā Sayyid Muḥammad Mīān. Delhi: Jamʿīyya Book Depot, n.d. 145. In this Urdu work the famous Indian sage Sayyid Ḥusayn Aḥmad Madanī comments on a portion of the *Futūḥāt*.

³⁶ See note 6 for sources on Hinduism. The similarity of the *muqaṭṭaʿāt* recitation with mantra is quite striking. David Frawley, the only westerner to our knowledge to have received traditional instruction in the full spectrum of Vedic literature, writes in his *Hymns of the Golden Age* :

Mantric language is language in which sound and meaning correspond.
(p. 20)

To understand the *Rīg Veda* or any ancient teaching or scripture requires a sense of mantra. It requires a different approach to language that takes all things

trials and torments of this world and the next as seas which are to be subjugated by beseeching Allah:³⁷

O Allah, O Most High, O Exalted, O Gentle, O All-Knowing
You are my Sustainer and your Knowledge is my sufficiency
How excellent a Sustainer is my Sustainer, How excellent a Sufficer is my Sufficer

You aid whom You choose and You are the All-Powerful, the Mercy bestowing

We beseech Your protection in our movements and our stillness, in our words, in our desires and out thoughts from the doubts and suspicions and the illusions that veil our hearts from the perception of the Unseen and truly *"have the Believers been tested and shaken, shaken severely and if the hypocrites and those with doubting hearts say: Allah and his Messenger did not promise us other than delusion"*³⁸

Firmly root us and support us and subjugate to us this Sea

As You subjugated the Sea to Mūsa

And You subjugated the Fire to Ibrāhīm

And You subjugated the Mountains and Iron to Dāwūd

And You subjugated the Winds and the Demons and the Jinn to Sulaymān

So subjugate to us every Sea of Yours on the Earth, in the Skies, the Dominions and the Heavenly Pleroma

And the Sea of this World and the Sea of the World to Come

And subjugate to us everything O You in "Whose Hand is the dominion over every thing."

KĀF HĀ' YĀ' 'AYN ŠĀD.

evocatively of the cosmic being. Such words become means of unification for ourselves and our environment and with our inner being. Their meanings are not artificially limited but expand creatively towards a universal comprehension. (p. 22)

The mantric language develops organically from various roots which are its prime mantras. As such it can always be systematically, by etymology, understood in terms of its prime root meaning. These roots are not rigid meanings. They are currents of meaning that unify. They reflect a way of being that manifests on all levels, a quality of energy, a spectrum or vibratory range. They are like prime numbers from which complex equations can be evolved but into which they are always resolvable. Yet they can never quite be put into words or defined. (p. 23)

All of the above comments apply to the *muqatta'āt* as well.

³⁷Durkee, *School of the Shādhīdhulīyyah*, 23-26.

³⁸ Qurʾān Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (33):11-12.

This repetition of KĀF ḤĀʾ YĀʾ ʿAYN ṢĀD³⁹ serves to actualize the realities of Sūrat Maryam within the reciter.⁴⁰ Later in the *Ḥizb* ḤĀʾ MĪM occurs followed by KĀF ḤĀʾ YĀʾ ʿAYN ṢĀD and ḤĀʾ MĪM ʿAYN SĪN QĀF which are all accompanied by certain hand and finger configurations akin to the *mūdras* of Hinduism and Tibetan and Shingon Buddhism.⁴¹ In particular ḤĀʾ MĪM is recited seven times. In six out of the seven times the hands point to each of the six directions while "internally" saying "By Allah all evil and catastrophe coming from these six directions is erased. By the *baraka* of these letters only good comes from the six directions."⁴² The seventh ḤĀʾ MĪM is uttered on the breath into one's upraised hands (in the manner of Muslim supplication {*duʿā*}) followed by passing them across the face. Concurrently one visualizes the image of ḤĀʾ MĪM inscribed (in Arabic) in light (*nūr*) across the breast from right to left. The quintuple pair KĀF ḤĀʾ YĀʾ ʿAYN ṢĀD and ḤĀʾ MĪM ʿAYN SĪN QĀF are repeated while opening and closing the fingers in a certain fashion.⁴³ These letters and indeed the entire *Ḥizb* should be recited in the manner of what is called *taḥqīq* in the science of Qurʾānic recitation (*ʿilm al-tajwīd*). This means that each letter of every word or utterance is pronounced clearly and correctly, giving

³⁹ These letters precede Sūrat Maryam (19).

⁴⁰ Sīdī Aḥmad Zarrūq, *Ibid.* fols. 18a-18b. Folios 23a-23b also contain discussions of other luminous letters namely YĀʾ SĪN, ḤĀʾ MĪM ʿAYN SĪN QĀF, ḤĀʾ MĪM, and ṬĀʾ SĪN.

⁴¹ See note 6.

⁴² Durkee, *School of the Shādhīdhulīyyah*, 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 32.

each letter its due (*ḥaqquhu*) by articulating it from the appropriate point of articulation (*makhraj*) in the human speech apparatus.⁴⁴

A further aspect of the internalization of the Qurʾān which is intrinsic to what we have called the onto-genesis of *taʾwīl* is the recitation of the Qurʾān itself. The method is based, on the one hand, on the homology of existence and on the multi-dimensionality of the Qurʾānic text, on the other. Certain ḥadīths attributed variously to the Prophet Muḥammad, ʿAlī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 114/733), Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) and Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d. 183/799), *ʿalayhimuʾl-ṣalātu waʾl-salām*, indicate that the Qurʾān may be read and understood on many levels.⁴⁵ Most of these sayings indicate that every Qurʾānic verse has an outer reality (*ẓahr*) and an inner reality (*baṭn*) and that the inner reality itself has seven inner realities. Various ṣūfis have attempted to write esoteric commentaries on the Qurʾān of this sort in which the inner reality of each verse of the Qurʾān is explained in seven ways corresponding to its seven inner realities. Among such works is the commentary of ʿAlā al-Dawla al-Simnānī (d. 736/1336).⁴⁶ Known as *Najm al-Qurʾān* or *Tafsīr*

⁴⁴ See Muḥammad Maḥmūd ʿAbdullāh, *Rawḍat al-dhākirin fī aḥkām tilāwat al-kitāb al-mubīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1409/1989), 26-27. It is no mere coincidence that the author—a professor of Qurʾānic sciences (*ʿulūm al-qurʾān*) at al-Azhar—includes a lengthy section on the manner of reciting the *muqattaʿāt* and expounds upon their significance.

⁴⁵ Ruzbihān Baqlī Shūrāzī, *ʿArāʾis al-Bayān fī Ḥaqāʾiq al-Qurʾān* (Lucknow, India: Maṭbaʿ Munshī Newāl Kishōr, 1301 H), 3-4; Sayyid Ḥaydar ʿAmulī, *al-Muḥīṭ al-Aʿẓam wa al-Baḥr al-Khiḍm fī Taʾwīl Kitāb Allāh al-ʿAzīz al-Muḥkam*, Sayyid Muḥsin al-Mūsawī al-Tabrizī (ed.), (Tehran: Muʾassasat al-Ṭibāʿah waʾl-Nashr, Wazārat al-Irshād al-Islāmī, 1414 H), 203-4.

⁴⁶ On his life and thought see Jamal Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

*Najm al-Qurān*⁴⁷ it remains unpublished and exists in numerous MSS⁴⁸ and is often found in MSS of *al-Ta'wīlāt al-Najmīyya* of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d. 618/1221) and is thus sometimes mistaken to be the completion of the later work which only goes up to Sūrat al-Dhāriyāt (51):18 since he died before being able to complete it.⁴⁹ However Simnānī's *tafsīr* is in every right an independent work. Commencing from Sūrat al-Ṭūr (52) he goes to the end of the Qur'ān. In addition the entire work is preceded by a highly original esoteric prolegomenon that lays down the principles of his *tafsīr*.⁵⁰ He also includes a commentary on the *Fātiḥa*, which immediately follows his prolegomenon. It is the vision espoused in this prolegomenon that concerns us in our discussion of the onto-genesis of ta'wīl. We spoke earlier of historical time or *al-zamān al-kathīf* which relates to persons, places and events such as Pharaoh, Mūsā ('alayhi'l-salām), trans-historical time (*al-zamān al-laṭīf*) which relates to the trans-historical dimension of persons, places and events (the tyrants in each age and those who destroy the, in our example), and we spoke of hyper-subtle time (*al-zamān al-alṭaf*): the destruction of the Pharaoh within by the

⁴⁷ It is known by several titles besides this one, for example: *al-Ta'wīlāt al-Najmīyya*, *Tafsīr Baṭn al-Qur'ān* and *Maṭla' al-Nuqaṭ wa Majma' al-Luqaṭ*. See Elias, *Throne Carrier of God*, 204.

⁴⁸ See Elias, *Ibid.*, 206-212, where he lists the particulars of all 27 known MSS.

⁴⁹ For a description of this *tafsīr* see Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Dhahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa'l-Mufasssīrūn* 3 vols. (Cairo: 1381/1961), 2:59-65.

⁵⁰ This prolegomenon has been edited and published by Paul Nwiya in *al-Abḥāth* 26 (1973-77), 141-57 based MS 6922 in the Bibliothèque National, Paris (designated below as Abḥāth without italics). We have compared this with MS 345 (2656) in the Garret Collection (Yahuda Section) of Firestone Library, Princeton University (designated below as Princeton MS) which contains his whole *tafsīr*. The prolegomenon of the Princeton MS matches the one published by Nwiya in the passages we are to cite.

Mūsā of one's being. It is such a spatio-temporal omni-dimensionality that Simnānī espouses.

Know—O he that seeks the correspondence (*munāsaba*) between the horizons (*āfāq*) and the souls (*anfus*) in the sacred address [i.e. the Qurʾān] to the subtle essences of humanity (*al-laṭāʾif al-insiyya*)—that the subtle matrix of the human form (*al-laṭifat al-qālabiyya*), which Allah kneaded with the Two Hands of the Subtle Distillation of Mercy (*luṭf*) and omnipotence...at the daybreak that separates the gloom of the night of creation (*zulmat al-layl al-khalqī*) from the light of day of divine command (*nūr al-nahār al-amrī*), is none other than the Ādam of your being (*ādamu wujūdika*).

...And the subtle essence of rising and descending desires (*al-laṭifat al-naṣsiyya*) burdened with a variety of tribulations (*anwāʿ al-balāʾ*) in the abode of affliction (*dār al-ibtilāʾ*) is none other than the Nūḥ of your being (*nūḥu wujūdika*).

The subtle essence of the heart (*al-laṭifat al-qalbiyya*) within which is nurtured the granule of progeny (*dharratu dhurriyyatin*) whose coming-to-be (*ḥāṣil*) in the oyster of its existence (*ṣadafu wujūdiḥā*) [i.e. of the subtle essence of the heart] is the pearl (*durra*) of the subtle essence of I-ness (*al-laṭifat al-anāʾiyya*) which is none other than the Ibrāhīm of your being (*ibrāhīmu wujūdika*).

The subtle essence of the secret (*al-laṭifat al-sirriyya*) that is favored with intimate conversation (*munājāt*) [with Allah] is none other than the Mūsā of your being (*mūsā wujūdika*).

The subtle essence of the spirit (*al-laṭifat al-rūḥiyya*) bestowed with the honor of divine vicegerency (*khilʿat al-khilāfa*) is none other than the Dāwūd of your being (*dāwūdu wujūdika*).

The subtle essence of the hidden (*al-laṭifat al-khaṭiyya*) supported by the holy spirit (*rūḥ al-quḍus*) is none other than the ʿĪsā of your being (*ʿīsā wujūdika*), bearing glad tidings to the nations of your subtle essences (*umamu laṭāʾifika*)...of the coming of the subtle essence of the real (*al-laṭifata al-ḥaqiqiyya*) and the manifestation of its clear signs...which is none other than the Muḥammad, *ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa ʾālihi sallam*, of your being (*muḥammadu wujūdika*).⁵¹

⁵¹ Abḥāth, 146-7 and Princeton MS fols. 2a-2b.

It is in the light of this understanding that the one is to recite the Qurʾān. Thus the act of recitation is transformed from mere repetition of words into the involution of the Qurʾānic text.

So whenever you here in the Book that which is addressed to Ādam hear it at the level of your subtle matrix (*bi laṭīfati qālibīyyatika*). Employ the subtle matrix of your human form in what the soul has been commanded or forbidden to do; and ponder what has been made an example for it [to emulate]. Be certain that the inner reality (*baṭn*) of this Book is intimately connected and concerned with you on the level of "the souls" (*fiʾl-anfus*), just as its outer relay (*zahr*) is intimately connected and concerned with Ādam on the level of "the horizons" (*fi al-āfāq*), so that thereby you may derive benefit from the speech of the Truth (*kalām al-ḥaqq*).⁵²

Similarly the *āyāt* of the Qurʾān addressed to Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, Dāwūd, and ʿĪsā, *ʿalayhimuʾl-salām*, are to be heard "with" or "at the level of" the subtle essences of rising and descending desires, the heart, the secret, the spirit, and the hidden, respectively. The culmination of the *taʾwīl* of one's being is with the coming of the Muḥammad, *ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa ālihi wa sallam*, which is none other than the subtle essence of the real which is the seal of the subtle essences (*khātam al-laṭāʾif*) just as Muḥammad, *ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa ālihi wa sallam*, is the Seal of the Prophets (*khātam al-anbiyāʾ*), and thus it represents the completion of the function of the other subtle essences in the process of increasing mystical enlightenment; the onto-genesis that is the spiritual exodus of the exegete.

The spiritual practice of internalization of the Qurʾān or what we have called involution of its text is, in advanced stages of the mystical path often supplemented with another method of involution in which the "subtle essence of the real" is to be sent forth, so to

⁵² Abḥāth, 147 and Princeton MS fol. 2b.

speak. This practice which is a process of absorption and involution essentially of the two *kalimas* LĀ ILĀHA ILLĀ ALLĀHU and MUḤAMMADU-R-RASŪLU-LLĀH is known as *murāqaba* (inward contemplation). It involves “circulating” the *shahādātayn* on the breath throughout all of the subtle centers or essences mentioned above. Before explaining this practice of circulation, however, the involutory character of the method must be made clear. The involution in question is a “backward flowing motion,” that is to say it is a directing of things to the “heart”: a movement or flow from *ẓāhir* (the outwardly manifest, the “without”) to *bāṭin* (the inwardly hidden, the “within”). One may liken it to the motion or flow of Arabic writing which *flows* from the right in movement towards the heart. It is instructive to think of this aspect of involution as *spatial*. This backward flow is also temporal, however. It is the reversal of the direction of temporal succession “which,” in the words of a contemporary *ṣūfī*, “in the efflorescence of its decay, is the decomposition of an ‘earlier’ time and a profanation of the eternal ‘present’ referred to by Allah in His saying *Surely we created man in the best of forms* (aḥsani taqwīm) *and then We reduced him to the lowest of the low* (asfala sāfilīn).”⁵³ Thus the involution is an integration. It returns the self to its source and origin.

The actual practice has the same conditions of ritual purity as the prayers and is best performed in the deep watches of the night. Sitting cross legged, facing the *qibla* one raises the hands in supplication (*duʿāʾ*) and recites on the breath the following: *al-Fātiḥa*, *Āyat*

⁵³ Durkee, *School of the Shādhīdhulīyyah*, 323. The reference is to Qurʾān Sūrat al-Ṭīn (94):4-5.

al-kursī, al-Kāfirūn, al-Ikhlāṣ, al-Falaq, al-Nās, and certain Qurʾānic formulæ with the intention of dispelling idle or evil thoughts.

Taking refuge within this zone of safety one concentrates on the centre of the sole or the big toe of the right foot and begins from there to draw a deep, smooth breath concentrating on the words: LĀ ILĀHA ILLĀ ALLĀHU in a rotating circle, and at the same time visualizing that the breath one is drawing into the core of oneself is rising, purifying, harmonising and suffusing the entire body with radiance and a silent resonance. This breath, drawn through the right nostril, must traverse the body until it reaches, with the sound of HŪW, that point between and slightly above the eyes known as the heavenly heart. At this point the breath should be retained like a drop of water on the tip of a leaf and then be smoothly released through the left nostril, traversing in its descent the whole body and all of its centres flowing out through the sole of the left foot.

The words and the sound attached to the down flow are MUḤAMMADU-R-RASŪLU-LLĀH which arrives at its destination and departs the body on the sound of ĀH. As it descends one visualises that the entire subtle body (*laṭīfah qālabīyyah*) is being washed and purified⁵⁴ ...In the course of the inward journey one reaches different centres. Each is a universe; each must in turn surrender and submit. Each individual cycle begins with negating the contingent reality of the centre with LĀ ILĀHA then passing 'upward' through the horizon of ILLĀ followed by the affirmation of the higher by the Highest: ALLĀH, *subḥānahu wa taʿālā*. Halting (*waqfa*) at that point, one then 'returns' from that ascension (*miʿrāj*) as the praised one, MUḤAMMAD, blessings and peace be upon him, the RASŪL of ALLĀH, with the message of voluntary surrender to Allāh. Each 'self' of each centre returns to its original state of Islām and thus does one negate and transmute all that is contingent in the Face of the Absolute.

This is the esoteric meaning of the 128th sign (āyāh) of Sūrat al-Tawbah, heard on the level of the subtle essence of the real that is none other than the Muḥammad, *ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa ʿālihi wa sallam*, of your being:

LAQADĀ JĀĀʾAKUM RASŪLUM-MIN ʾANFUSIKUM ʾAZĪZUN
ʾALAYHI MĀ ʾANITTUM ḤARISUN ʾALAYKUM BI-L-MUʾMINĪNA
RAʾŪFUR-RAḤĪM:

There has come to you a Messenger from among your selves; grievous to him is your suffering; anxious is he over you, gentle to the believers, compassionate.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

It is to this reality that perhaps the greatest of the ṣūfī poets in the Arabic language, Sīdī ʿUmar Ibn al-Fāriḍ, *quddisa sirruhu*, alludes in his celebrated *Poem of the Way rhyming in TĀʾ* (*Tāʿiyyat al-Sulūk*):

ilayya rasūlan kuntu minnī mursalan

*wa dhātī bi āyātī ʿalayyaʾstadallatī*⁵⁵

I was a prophet sent to myself from Myself

And it is myself who, by my own signs was guided towards myself

All of the foregoing practices and doctrines have their source in the Qurʾān. The former in the sense that the involve recitation—in some fashion or another—of its text, and the latter inasmuch as they derive from that text. Both the doctrines and the practices, however, are but reflections of the blinding light of the Shadowless Envoy of the Real: MUḤAMMADU-R-RASŪLU-LLĀH, who was none other than the Qurʾān personified, *ṣallallāhu ʿalayhi wa ālihi wa sallam*.

We have blackened many a page and our words are simply words; mere “tears shed on the shore of non-existence”⁵⁶ speaking a certain reality; but they are not that reality, for it is only realized by entry into the realm of reality: the world of the Book whose words and signs are inscribed, both within and without, and are read only by those with hearts wherewith to understand (*lahum qulūbun yaʿqilūna bihā*).

We shall show them our signs on the horizons and within themselves until it will be made manifest unto them that He is the Truth.
-Qurʾān Sūrat Fuṣṣilat (41:53)

⁵⁵ *Diwān Ibn al-Fāriḍ*, ʿAbd al-Khāliq Maḥmūd (ed.), (Cairo: 1995), 275, which he counts as verse 460. Note that there are numerous editions of the *Diwān* with various numberings and arrangements of verses and *qaṣīdas*. This edition is, however the best that we have come across.

⁵⁶ This is a phrase attributed to Sīdī Abū al-Ḥasan Shādhadhulī

Beyond this there is nothing more that can or should be said.



